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ABSTRACT

A bibliographic research project was conducted to identify the major articles published from 1974 to 1984 on measurement and evaluation in public relations, business, and organizational communication. The major findings of the project were as follows: (1) Some kind of evaluation and measurement is needed; (2) There is no consensus about the type of methodology that might be most effective; (3) Most research consisted of either feedback considered as evaluation, surveys to see what research is being done, limited attitude or opinion surveys, one-shot experimental studies, readership and readability formulae, or a program evaluation that counted column inches or television time; and (4) There is a pervasive desire to reinvent the wheel. Methods for the instructor to use in overcoming some of the limitations imposed by the restricted standing of measurement and evaluation include seeking out agencies and competitive corporations using high-level, quality research, and being aware of evaluation methodologies used in collateral disciplines, with consideration of a centralized method for distributing bibliographies of such disciplines. (EL)

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THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG:
BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON
MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION
IN PUBLIC RELATIONS, 1974-1984

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INTRODUCTION

In late 1983, The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) commissioned the author to conduct one of three bibliographic research projects covering literature from 1974 to 1984. The author's topic was evaluation and measurement; the other topics were ethics and planning. The project was published by IABC as a monograph in 1984.¹

This paper will examine the major findings of the study, discuss some of the problems in bibliographic research, update the study with a discussion of some of the major implications since May 1984, and suggest ways in which such bibliographies might be used.

THE IABC STUDY

The study was designed to identify major articles on measurement and evaluation in public relations, business and organizational communication. It was never intended to be an advanced guide for conducting high-level measurement, but to serve as a starting point for practitioners, educators and students.

The bibliography was not global, nor can it be assumed to be all-inclusive. The conditions of the grant limited the research and reporting time to four months. Researchers conducted computer searches, examination of stacks of journals and texts, consultation with peers and other bibliographies.

The result was a 90-page monograph, with 304 citations, most of them annotated. Studies were drawn from the traditional non-research journals, such as Public Relations Journal, Communication World, and pr reporter, major texts in public relations, communication, and research, and major research journals such as Public Relations Review and Journalism Quarterly. Researchers also found relevant articles in journals more removed from the traditional journalism/public relations path -- California Management Review, and New Directions for Community Colleges were only two examples.

FINDINGS

Survey after survey has suggested that formal methods of evaluation and measurement are used by a limited number of practitioners, but that most do not use a formal methodology. At the convention where this research was first presented, two research papers dealt with the problem of evaluation methods, supporting the findings of this bibliographic project. David M. Dozier surveyed regional members of PRSA and IABC for two years, and reinforced what researchers have argued: there was only a slight increase in the number of practitioners using scientific method; most do it -- if they do it at all -- by the seat of their pants.² Jon White and Oliver Ross reported that concern for evaluation must be preceded by concern for the definition of the problem, but that most problems are ill-structured and that their definition is social and requisite rather than objective and precise.³ Two other papers on that program applied quantitative methods to the evaluation of a communication program.⁴

These reports reinforce the major findings of the bibliographic project:

1. There is concern among practitioners and academicians that some kind of evaluation and measurement is needed;
2. There is no consensus about the type of methodology which might be most effective;
3. Most reported research fell into six categories:
 - a. Surveys to see what research is being done;
 - b. Limited attitude or opinion surveys;
 - c. One-shot experimental studies;
 - d. Readership and readability formulae;
 - e. Evaluation of a program by counting column inches or television time;
 - f. Feedback considered as evaluation.
4. There is a pervasive desire to reinvent the wheel.

Of course, research is being done at a high-level by practitioners, corporations and consultants. Just as one example, the author met with a local consultant whose firm is using sophisticated statistical analysis, including discriminate analysis, factor analysis and multiple regression, to determine why an individual chooses a primary-care physician. The consultant is providing his client with useful information about the uses and gratification needs of the audience.

However, the work of consultants and marketing-oriented practitioners rarely appear in print. There are many possible explanations for the lack of available documentation at this level of sophisticated methodology: lack of incentive to publish; lack of time to develop articles; and, probably the most important

reason, the confidentiality which often must exist between client and consultant, employer and employee.

The articles which appeared tend to be discussions of ways to conduct the most basic formative research and translate the findings into a "bottom line" to "prove" a program's success or failure. Yet, the articles were primarily theoretical, with few suggestions beyond survey methodology as a way of pre- and post-testing campaigns. Authors seemed to be turning increasingly to the concept of integrating marketing survey concepts into public relations evaluation, and the whole cross-disciplinary area of "social marketing research" is emerging within advertising, marketing and public relations.

Except of those few articles, mainly from the academic community, which called for some application of marketing survey tools, the writers were concerned with one-way communication; those who advocated what Grunig and Hunt called "two-way asymmetrical" or "two-way symmetrical" communication⁵ suggested ways of "piggy-backing" p.r. concerns onto the tools being used by advertising and marketing. Many of the concerns in conducting formative and evaluative research alike centered around a three-fold lack: of time, of money, of expertise.

When communicators did evaluate, or "obtain feedback", according to the Profile/83 study⁶ [note: for presentation, the Profile/85 data will be available¹ of IABC, more than 80 percent of the respondents said they did apply written objectives "on a regular basis," but the study did not explain the specifics of the objectives or the methods of application.

The most common feedback method of the study was the opinion/attitude survey, followed by readership surveys, meetings and

personal interviews.

The situation regarding the educators' role was well expressed by Kenneth Owler Smith in the Walker 1981 study:

It is clear to any thoughtful observer of the communications scene that the thrust of public relations education in the near-term will be towards increased emphasis on research, analysis and critical evaluation.

Most of the respected public relations programs are producing graduates who are vocationally competent, but cannot continue in light of the profession's need.

Already a trend is emerging which indicates public relations education is becoming more academic in nature and less 'professional', or to use a more accurate term, 'vocational.'

The task of PR educators will be to produce graduates who can solve the vast spectrum of communications programs, not simply become skilled participants in the problem area. 7

APPLYING THE FINDINGS

The bibliography was structured along an adapted version of Lasswell's classic communication model:

Who? Says What? Through What Channel? To Whom? With What Result?

Added to Lasswell's "result" construct has been feedback, which might be considered a result of communication. Although there are apparent flaws in using the model as a method of organizing the literature, especially since some studies cross the model's boundaries, it can be a good structure upon which to hang the discussion of application of findings, and areas where more research clearly needs to be conducted.

In considering a more recent model, the Grunig-Hunt range of public relations as press agency--public information--two-way asymmetric--two-way symmetric,⁸ most of the research fell into the public information model, where the authors estimate about half of the practitioners function today. This model is particularly appropriate for consideration within the framework of the Lasswell communication model, conveniently.

Even with the basic tools of mass communication measurement and evaluation available, and with the current theories stressing a study of the audience, published research by practitioners and academicians alike focused on the easiest part of the Lasswell model to measure: the actual message and the use of it by the media.

The message was subjected to FOG or SMOG or the Flesch index and was usually shown to be readable.

It was tabulated in column -- or square -- inches. It was translated to impress management ("All our press coverage laid end-to-end would circle headquarters three times..."). It was converted into a "bottom line" measurement by converting "free space" into what comparable advertising space would have cost, and expressed as CPM.

All of this evaluation rests upon the assumption that publication means readership and readership means a positive effect. In this Miltonian free marketplace of ideas, truth -- if published -- will triumph.

Yet, remarkably few studies have looked at the other parts of the model. Spurred on, perhaps, by the evolution of corporate audits and communication audits which emerged in the 1950s from organizational communication, some authors have dealt with the

problem of the audience's knowing the source. But few business communicators seemed concerned with the attributes of the source for a particular message, although concern about the communicator's credibility and image can be traced to Aristotle.

Likewise, the medium has been carefully skirted in evaluating the success or failure of a campaign. Is face-to-face communication preferable to written? Video versus print? Magazines or newsletters or magapapers?

While anecdotal evidence suggests that the medium may be critical, few studies have appeared in the literature testing the effectiveness of various media. Yet, practitioners have suggested that the design alone of a publication can have a strong effect on its results. One company, without pre-testing, went from a typewritten newsletter to one that was typeset, professionally. The reaction was not feedback, but backlash; employees perceived typeset copy as expensive and not as up-to-the-minute as the typewritten. The company solved the problem: they now set the type in a typewriter face, and complaints have stopped. Yet, the costly switch-overs could have been avoided. Likewise, there is anecdotal evidence that United States publication design is not useful for the foreign publications of multinational corporations, yet there appears to be no solid data to either support or refute the theory.

The message, like the medium, was not a popular topic. Few examples emerged of the use of experimental or even pre-testing of message appeals prior to a campaign. One national association,

dealing with an emotional and controversial issue, could not decide whether to base their campaign around an emotional appeal, a factual appeal, or both. Since they did no testing, the public information director explained that they produced three separate campaigns that year, none of which was even post-tested.

The remaining parts of the Lasswell model -- the receiver and the effect -- are on the higher end of the Grunig-Hunt continuum, and seem to appear rarely in literature about public relations, except for the occasional measurement by basic evaluation or feedback measures. Ironically, marketing research has made great strides in this decade in recognizing constraints and psychographics which define audiences.

As mentioned earlier, it must be borne in mind, that much of the sophisticated formative and evaluative research is being conducted, in the words of Grunig and Hunt, "by competitive businesses, agencies, and regulated businesses."⁹ Hence, much of their data and methodology is not available to the average practitioner or academician.

There may be methods for the instructor to overcome some of the limitations imposed by the restricted, and rather disappointing, standing of measurement and evaluation:

1. As mentioned, agencies and competitive corporations are using high-level, quality research. There may be those practitioners willing to share methods and tools, and they should be sought out and the information disseminated as much as possible.

2. Researchers should be aware of the evaluation methodologies used in collateral disciplines, and a centralized method for distributing bibliographies on such disciplines should be considered, perhaps along the lines of the annotated bibliographies published in the newsletter of the International Division. Such disciplines might include, but not be restricted to,:

a. Mass communication: public relations, based in journalism schools so often, has used many of the mass communication research methods, but it is relatively easy to earn a journalism or public relations degree without having a research course. Even so basic a tool as drawing a sample and designing a questionnaire, is beyond the methodological capabilities of a great number of practitioners, who turn to marketing consultant, not to conduct the survey, but to show them the very basics.

b. Persuasion: Persuasion seems to have taken on many of the negative connotations previously loaded upon the word "propaganda." Yet, so much of public relations and organizational communication involves persuasion that to neglect this body of research, as do so many of the texts and articles in public relations, would seem to deprive the practitioner of basic theory and tools. Theorists differ on the proper role of persuasion in public relations, but the history of persuasive theory is full of meaningful writings from Aristotle's rules in Rhetoric through Machiavelli and Hitler to the Right-to-Life and Pro-Choice campaigns.

Lerbinger has developed a text which attempts to present much of the scientific knowledge of persuasion in a form applicable for practical communication skills.¹⁰ Rice and Paisley examined public information campaigns from a theoretical persuasive format with an invaluable bibliography.¹¹ (Unfortunately, the book recently went out of print.)

The experiments of researchers like Burgoon, Miller and Reardon can--and have--filled volumes. There is much in persuasive literature, often tested in small group situations, that can be of great use to the educator, but little testing has been done to apply persuasive theory to public relations or business.

c. Organization communication: The field of organizational communication, often housed within a speech department, has pioneered the using of auditing (including the widely-used International Communication Association audit), developed comprehensive bibliographic essays on auditing and evaluation, and done substantive research into interpersonal and small group relationship.

d. Advertising and marketing: Models, evaluation, measurement, theory-building, and sophisticated multivariate analysis to determine audience needs, wants, uses and gratifications, abound in these disciplines, and a tremendous body of knowledge exists which could apply to the practice of public relations.

3. Educators should be aware of the possible application of high-tech methods which would apply to the most simple methods of evaluation. For example, there is an effective readability program already written in BASIC. Similar programs might be applied for simple survey analysis, correlations, and general

medium-level data analysis and data base establishment, for use on small, even personal computers. Some of the mathematical programs exist, and educators with larger systems might examine the possibility of developing modeling programs similar to those used in marketing and economics.

IMPLICATIONS

The suggestions might help in teaching and examining the basic evaluation and measurement procedures, in terms of educating students about available techniques, but will not solve the basic questions in the field.

As an academic discipline, scientific measurement of public relations and communications is still struggling to build and test theories, but the recent texts on public relations management and increased concern with the high-level decision-making functions of public relations bode well for the future.

The author, however, is concerned that many researchers may become too involved in the small-scale, one-shot study; much of early mass communication and persuasion research, regrettably, involved one-time experimental studies whose results conflicted with earlier experiments and impeded a strong theory development.

Meanwhile, public relations education in measurement and evaluation needs a strong centralized method of gathering information about what is going on in the "real world" and in the collateral disciplines, since bibliographic projects such as the IABC study are potentially valuable, but are so soon out of date.

ENDNOTES

¹Cline, C. Evaluation and Measurement in Public Relations and Organizational Communication: A Literature Review (San Francisco: IABC Foundation, 1984).

²David Dozier, "The Evolution of Evaluation Methods Among Public Relations Practitioners," Rendezvous '84: Proceedings of the IABC international meeting, June 1984.

³John White and Oliver Ross, "The Search for Practical Methodologies for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication Activities," in Ibid.

⁴Nancy Kiefer, "Agenda Setting and Corporate Communication Issues: Can the Mass Media Influence Corporate Stock Prices?"; Carolyn Cline and Lynn Masel-Walters, "Illinois Bell Reaches Out: Measuring the Effect of a Videotape Case Study on Student Opinions," both in Ibid.

⁵James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984) p. 22.

⁶Profile '83 (San Francisco: IABC, 1983) p.6.

⁷Albert Walker, Status and Trends in Public Relations Education in U.S. Senior Colleges and Universities 1981, (New York: Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, 1981) p.15.

⁸Grunig and Hunt, p.22

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Otto Lerbinger, Designs for Persuasive Communication (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

¹¹Ronald Rice and William J. Paisley. Public Communication Campaigns (Beverly Hills, Cal.: 1981).